

# Jack Murtha: America's conscience

By John B. Larson

John Kennedy in his Pulitzer Award winning book "Profiles in Courage" wrote eloquently of the nation's heroes who put country above politics or themselves. On Nov. 16, Rep. Jack Murtha manifested such courage when he called for the immediate redeployment of our troops from Iraq.

Until two weeks ago, Murtha, while revered in western Pennsylvania and his state's corner on the floor of the House, was not a household name. A conservative Democrat, he's known best as the insiders' insider, a go-to guy on matters of defense and intelligence who operates under the radar and rarely speaks to the press.

Murtha's reputation as a defender of the nation's military is unimpeachable, earned and tested over many decades. A retired colonel who spent 37 years in the Marine Corps and Reserves, he is ranking member of the defense appropriations subcommittee and the first Vietnam veteran elected to Congress. In Vietnam, he served with distinction, earning two Purple Hearts and a Bronze Star.

Murtha is honest, blunt, patriotic, and protective of our troops. His uncompromising loyalty to his nation extends to his commander in chief, whether it be Presidents Ford, Carter, Reagan, George H. W. Bush, Clinton, or the current President Bush. Because of his background in defense and intelligence, Murtha has been called upon by each of these administrations, serving as liaison for the government to Panama, the Philippines, Lebanon, and Turkey.

I've had the opportunity and the privilege to travel to Iraq three times with Murtha, and I'm always deeply impressed by the depth of his understanding, his frankness, and his ability to communicate with our soldiers.

The last time we visited Baghdad, we stopped, as he always does, at Ramstein Air Base and Hospital in Germany

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ON NOV. 16, Murtha asked Democratic Majority Leader Nancy Pelosi if he could address the caucus on a matter of deep importance to him. Murtha seldom addresses the caucus with the exception of reviewing the defense appropriation bill. Since that bill had passed in the House, his request was out of the ordinary.

So was his speech. Murtha arrived at his plan after long, critical analysis, deep soul searching, and great struggle. His conclusion was based on what he believes is in the best interest of the men and women who wear the uniform and the nation he loves.

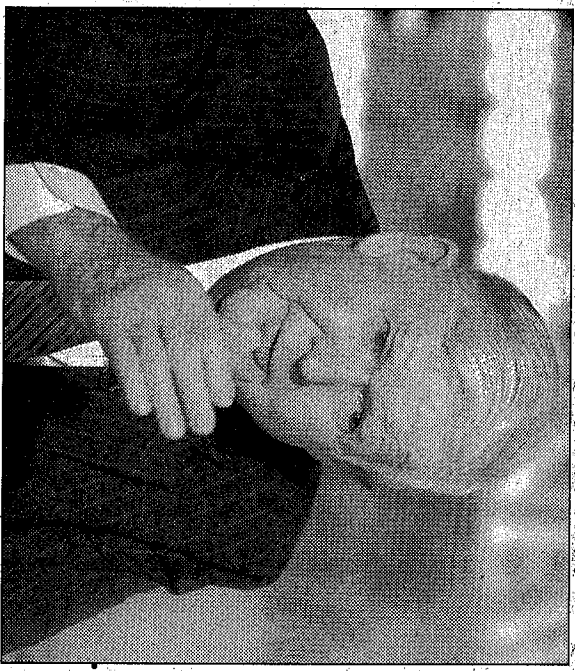
Speaking to the caucus, Murtha focused on the troops' valor, their sacrifice, and their heroics in the face of shortages of manpower and equipment. His stories of his weekly visits to Bethesda Naval Hospital and Walter Reed Army Medical Center were riveting. In a caucus that is often boisterous, you could hear a pin drop.

Absent the deployment to Iraq of thousands of more troops, which would require a politically unfeasible military draft, Murtha called for the only other practicable solution: the immediate redeployment of troops, consistent with standard safety and security procedures, thus strategically salvaging the best of a bad situation in Iraq.

He then outlined a detailed, clear-headed plan to continue our support for Iraq's fledgling democracy while removing our troops from the path of the insurgency that their presence incites.

Our troops would be strategically deployed to the periphery (in military terms a process that would take about six months.) A quick-strike force of U.S. Marine units would provide military assistance to Iraqis against insurgents, while economic and diplomatic aid would be the chief means of delivering stability to Iraq.

Murtha said we needed to notify the Iraqi government now before its Dec. 15 election of our intention to redeploy, so the



ABC News via Associated Press

Rep. John Murtha

Iraqis — as well as regional players, including the Arab League, NATO, India, China, Pakistan, and Russia — would know that the United States will not continue to twist in the wind and exhaust our limited resources to the detriment of our troops and nation.

It was a plan that Murtha hoped President Bush might embrace. As he explained, his conscience had led him there, and it required that he speak to the press alone.

He spoke not as Democrat nor as the Defense Appropriation Committee's ranking member, but as an American who has stood by his country on the battlefield and in Congress.

It was the right thing to do.

He never asked for support or consideration of his proposal. He spoke to us first because he felt honor bound to notify the caucus before they read about it in the papers or heard it on CNN.

Murtha's comments to reporters sent shockwaves across the media. This 73-year-old Marine veteran explained, "Because the troops can't, we (the elected officials) have a responsibility to speak for them."

As one pundit put it, when the administration loses a guy like Murtha, it loses Middle America.

**WHAT FOLLOWED WAS SAD.** We saw it when Max Cleland dared question the administration, when John McCain was a presidential primary threat, and when John Kerry ran for president. The last attacks gave the tactic a name: swift boating.

In rapid fire, the president, vice president, the civilian Pentagon, and the speaker of the House — all taking a page from Karl Rove's playbook — went after Murtha full force, because he had the temerity to disagree with the Bush administration and put forward an alternative.

The Republican-controlled house issued an immediate ethics inquiry into Murtha led by Joe Wilson (R-S.C.). Duncan Hunter, the Republican chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, submitted a phony resolution mocking Murtha and his proposal. Republicans marched to the floor with Rove's scripted talking points. Their histrionics climaxed when freshman Rep. Jean Schmidt assailed Murtha as a "coward" who "cuts and runs."

Schmidt's aspersions caused an uproar on the House floor before saner heads prevailed and she was forced to apologize. The vehemence that meets the speaking of truth to power, as Murtha did, is disheartening. And an administration that can't level with the troops or the nation is even more disheartening. But in the days since those first vitriolic attacks, the administration has soft peddled its offensive against Murtha because it has come to learn the public is with him.

The public is not necessarily for Murtha's plan — for all his candor and clarity, he's not infallible — but they support him for his willingness to take a stand, and then stand his ground. As one e-maller wrote to the House minority leader, "You tell that Old Jarhead he rocks!"

Murtha would never call what he did courageous. Courage is what our troops do every day. What he gave America was a profile in conscience, an example of a thoughtful assessment of the reality we face. And then the courage to speak out.

Jack Murtha will be remembered for many things. But he will be revered for changing the course of events in Iraq by speaking from his heart and his head, and, in doing so, becoming America's conscience.

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